

Role vs Status: A Psychological Discourse in Tahereh Mafi's *Shatter Me* Series

Ms. Sharon Rejoice Samson

Reg No: 2511127022009, Ph.D. Research Scholar,

Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai,

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012.

Email: sharonrejoice18@gmail.com

Dr. S. Sophia Christina

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai,

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012.

ABSTRACT

The term 'psyche' typically refers to the human mind and its functioning. Narrative Psychology focuses on the construction and interpretation of a character's story, thereby presenting their identity to the readers. Ralph Linton, an American anthropologist, well known for his concept of role theory, makes a clear distinction between role and status. Role describes the behaviour linked to status, whereas status is a person's place within a community or a system. In the dystopian world of the *Shatter Me* Series by Tahereh Mafi, characters of various statuses, including leaders, soldiers, rebels, and commoners, who are otherwise meant to be slaves for the dystopian regime, 'The Reestablishment' are present. Each of their roles varies according to their status. For instance, the role of the protagonist, Juliette Ferrars, changes from an unfairly

imprisoned teenager to that of a resilient leader based on her status. This paper discusses how the role of each character varies based on their societal status with reference to Linton's Role Theory.

Keywords: Psyche, Dystopian, Role, Status, Identity.

Introduction:

Psyche refers to the way a human mind works and thinks. This human psyche plays a role in shaping the personality of a person. 'Narrative Psychology' defines the way in which an individual can construct an identity for themselves. The identity of each person's role differs based on their status in society. This paper gives a detailed idea on how narrative psychology works with reference to the concept called 'Role Theory' by an American anthropologist, Ralph Linton.

Narrative Psychology:

As mentioned above, Narrative Psychology refers to the way a person is able to interpret others' personality or identity. It is a perspective of human psychology, which helps humans to deal with experiences by observing and listening to the stories of others. The word 'narrative' refers to the method of articulating the experiences witnessed in life in a meaningful way. In narrative psychology, a person's life story becomes a form of identity, that informs how they choose to reflect on it and further shape their character. This paper discusses the characters from a dystopian work, *Shatter Me Series*, by an Iran-American author Tahereh Mafi. This paper also describes narrative psychology through multiple characters from the selected series.

Aaron Warner, one of the chief commanders of the dystopian government, 'The Reestablishment' is portrayed to be cruel and heartless at the beginning of the series; but as the story develops, the readers realise that he is not a villain, but rather a character with a misunderstood identity.

I have sentenced myself to a life of solitude, one wherein I have no peers, and no mind but my own to live in. I looked to build myself as a feared leader, and I've succeeded; no one will question my authority or posit a contrary opinion. No one will speak to me as anything but the chief commander and regent of Sector 45. Friendship is not a thing I have ever experienced. Not as a child, and not as I am now. (*Unite Me*, 15)

At the beginning of the series, Warner is being shown through the perspective of Juliette Ferrars, the protagonist of the series. Juliette is an innocent teenager locked in the asylum for her supernatural ability of lethal touch. The totalitarian regime, 'The Reestablishment' is known for its notorious and inhumane ruling structure. People who are examined with any kinds of supernatural ability are locked and made to suffer for the benefits of the government. Juliette, as such is locked and examined by Warner for the benefits of the dystopian regiment, "Utilizing her as a weapon was a story I fed my father; I needed an excuse to have access to her, to gain the necessary clearance to study her files" (45). Later as the story moves on, it is revealed that he is studying about her powers to analyse the powers of his bedridden mother. While Juliette possesses the power of lethal touch, where it is dangerous to touch someone else, Warner's mother's power makes her hurt herself when her skin makes contact with her own body.

Warner, to find an antidote for his mother's sickness, merely observes the way Juliette's power works. He has no intentions in using her powers for the destruction of the society. Further through the eyes of Juliette, he shoots a soldier for taking an extra bag of food, which portrays him as a hard heartened

leader, but it is later revealed that he shot the soldier because he found out that he was abusing his pregnant wife and kids, and by the death of him he has helped the family to be freed from this torment. As the story develops, the readers get to observe the way Warner's identity gets interpreted and constructed from individual perspectives. This example brings forth the idea on how narrative psychology works.

Role Theory:

Ralph Linton, a well renowned American anthropologist has mentioned on how a role differs based on the status of a person. This concept is named as 'Role Theory.' The narrative psychology is further discussed in this paper with the reference of Linton's concept of role theory. As mentioned above, Aaron Warner's identity is being portrayed as that of a cruel leader. But once he gets a chance to grow close with Juliette becoming her lover, other characters start witnessing his true nature. Here, it can be seen on how the status of being a leader and that of a companion to Juliette changes his role.

Linton in his 1936 work, *The Study of Man: An Introduction* mentions, "... the status of any individual means the sum total of all the statuses he occupies. It represents his position with relation to the total society" (113). Similarly, Juliette Ferrars, the protagonist of this series adapts multiple roles as her position changes throughout the story. Her thoughts evolves as the situation changes. When she is locked in an asylum for her power, she considers herself a monster as the society saw her as one. She is not ready to accept her power. She wishes for someone to kill her because of her power. But when she escapes the asylum with the help of two soldiers Adam Kent and Kenji Kishimoto, she attains freedom. The change of environment helps her changing her very own perspective on herself. From viewing herself as a monster influenced by the views of the society, she starts to obtain a new opinion on herself, she starts to accept her own powers.

With the help of Kenji, an undercover of a rebel team called Omega Point, Juliette and Adam seek refuge at Omega Point. It is a place with people who are against the regiment of the dystopian rule. Some of these rebels are also encompassed with superpowers like Juliette. By conversing and living together with people like herself, she starts viewing her power in a positive light rather than in a negative light. "Ideas and emotions are reinforced in each individual who share them." (94). Realising her ability, she starts using it for the welfare of the people defeating the government. As she starts protecting the people, the same society that considered her a monster, identifies her as their leader, who can protect them from the totalitarian government, 'The Reestablishment.' In his other work titled, *The Cultural Background of Personality*, Linton brings out the idea on how the character's personality shapes itself based on the societal culture. Similarly, Juliette fits into the society adapting a new personality as a leader.

Castle, the head of Omega Point acts as pillar in everyone's life. He plays a major role in changing the perspective of Juliette about herself. But when he loses some of his people and their solace, Omega Point in a bomb blast, he starts losing himself. He steps back from his purpose of leading the survivors of Omega Point. "Status and role serve to reduce the ideal patterns for social life to individual terms" (*The Study of Man: An Introduction*, 114). When he steps back, Juliette steps up in motivating the survivors. She finds a purpose. The roles get reversed. Because of the change in the societal structure, Castle adapts a new personality. Warner getting involved helps him to come out of his mind and find his purpose again. Castle forms Omega Point studying the ideas and observing the process of the formation of 'The Reestablishment.' This observation helps him in recreating a team with another group of rebels led by his daughter, Nouria, after the destruction of Omega Point.

When Juliette, along with her team defeats and kills Anderson, Warner's father and the supreme commander of the North American division, Juliette takes over his role as the head. Juliette's thoughts as a

leader have always been fighting the dystopian regime but when she is plagued with millions of political paperwork and requests from the people, she loses her authoritative presence. Warner's mind leads him to the dark after the death of his father, "I have a great fear of drowning in the ocean of my own silence" (*Restore Me*, 87). This makes him unable to guide Juliette on the right path as a leader. Juliette on the other hand, starts losing belief in herself once again as a leader. She feels as if she is not living up to the name of the leader that the people expected. The supreme commanders of other continents send their children to observe the outcome of the defeat of one of their leaders. Their plan is to eradicate the sector where Juliette rules, and reinstate a new leader that obeys the rules of the Reestablishment, "They're only here to figure out how much work it will take to destroy us" (173). The children of the supreme commanders, even though they have no intentions in doing bad deeds, are forced to obey their rules as leaders. "People abide by the mores of their societies quite as much because they desire approval as because they fear punishment" (*The Cultural Background of Personality*, 5).

Power – An Achieved Status:

Linton mentions on how power changes the aspect of living. Power plays a vital role through one's achieved status in the society. The supreme commanders of each continent were together in military before 'The Reestablishment' came into existence. When they realise they have the power to change and bring everyone under their control, they start to manipulate the people. As the environment is already on the brink of destruction, the people wish a change in the government. The Reestablishment sees an opening and lets themselves in, making people trust all their lies of recovering the environment. Getting seated on the throne, gaining power, the totalitarian government begins to eradicate natural resources, wanting to make people depend entirely on them. "The foundation of every society is an aggregate of individuals. This provides the raw material from which society, as such, may be developed." (*The Study of Man: An*

Introduction, 92), says Linton on the way how a new society can be formed. Following the promise of better world makes the people lose their identity and individuality, as they become slaves of the dystopian regime. They are constantly under surveillance of the scrutinising eyes of the government. Their job is taken and the peace is disrupted. This is what Linton mentions on how attaining power can change an identity of a person of high status.

Even in societies which lack a true class structure with its associated differences in cultural patters, there is usually a feeling that individuals of high prestige should behave in certain ways. This is reflected in our own familiar phrase, noblesse oblige. Such persons are usually expected to be chary in the exercise of their real power and considerate of those below them, and failure in this results in loss of esteem. (*The Cultural Background of Personality*, 48).

The supreme commanders choose to display their power in a pessimistic way, while their children convey it in a positive aspect. These kids, understanding the cruelties of their parents, defeat and destroy them, overtaking the rule in their hands. Juliette plays an important role in defeating the original leaders of the Reestablishment. Realising supernatural ability, she uses it against them. As the story moves further, it is revealed that Juliette is also the daughter of the leader of a supreme commander, who is considered the brain of the Reestablishment. She pursued a medical role in the military before strategising a blueprint to takeover. Step by step, she proceeded with her ideas before executing her massive plans. Linton says "The transformation normally begins with aldivision of the activities necessary to the immediate well-being of the group and their assignment to particular individuals." (*The Study of Man: An Introduction*, 92). She makes her daughters the main guinea pigs of the Reestablishment. Juliette's sister, Emmaline is used, plugged into machines to control the minds of the people all over the world portraying them that the world is being

deteriorated through her power of telekinesis. This paves the way for the dystopian leaders to gain trust of the people and slowly takeover the government.

Juliette who was originally named Ella, is sent away to the US, with Warner's father, Anderson, the supreme commander of America. Her memories are erased, and she is named Juliette and is adopted by someone who considers her a curse rather than a blessing. Juliette's self-identity is forcefully taken from her. On the other hand, Emmaline is used by the government for manipulating the people with her supernatural power. While Juliette lost her identity, Emmaline loses herself and her individuality because of the cruel wishes of their mother, Evie. This makes both the sisters adapt to their new roles as their societal status changed. They are pawn in the massive plan laid by the supreme leaders of the regime.

When Emmaline cannot handle the cruelties anymore, she helps the children of every supreme commander in regaining their lost and erased memory. "... my parents have been lying to me since I was a kid – stealing my memories and rewriting my history" (*Defy Me*, 45) As the memories are being brought to the forefront of their mind, they slowly realise the inhuman characters of their parents and join hands together in defeating their parents and taking over the rule away from them. The children prove that gaining a higher status does not mean the ability of showcasing the power in a negative way. They start helping the people and bringing back the ruined environment to life.

Conclusion:

Linton's concept of Role theory helps in creating an idea on how the narrative psychology is implemented in the selected work. Status has a lot of potential in interpreting the role of an individual in the society. "Social systems serve as a guide to the shaping of individuals and to their arrangement in certain relations to each other." (*The Study of Man: An Introduction*, 107). A third person can analyse the personality of a person, through the way they behave, helping them create an identity. If a person in a higher status gains access to use power in a pessimistic way, it can lead to the destruction of their identity. Power is an influential tool in altering the course of life.

Works Cited

Linton, Ralph. *The Cultural Background of Personality*. Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, London, 1952.

---. *The Study of Man: An Introduction*. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1936.

Mafi, Tahereh. *Defy Me*. Electric Monkey, 2019.

---. *Ignite Me*, Electric Monkey, 2018.

---. *Imagine Me*, Electric Monkey, 2020.

--- *Restore Me*, Electric Monkey, 2018.

---. *Shatter Me*, Electric Monkey, 2018.

--- *Unite Me*, Electric Monkey, 2019.

--- *Unravel Me*, Electric Monkey, 2018.

"Role Theory". Wikipedia, 24 Aug. 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Role_theory